

Hermit's Swing

VICTOR KOLUPAEV

Translated from the Russian by Helen Saltz Jacobson

Introduction by THEODORE STURGEON

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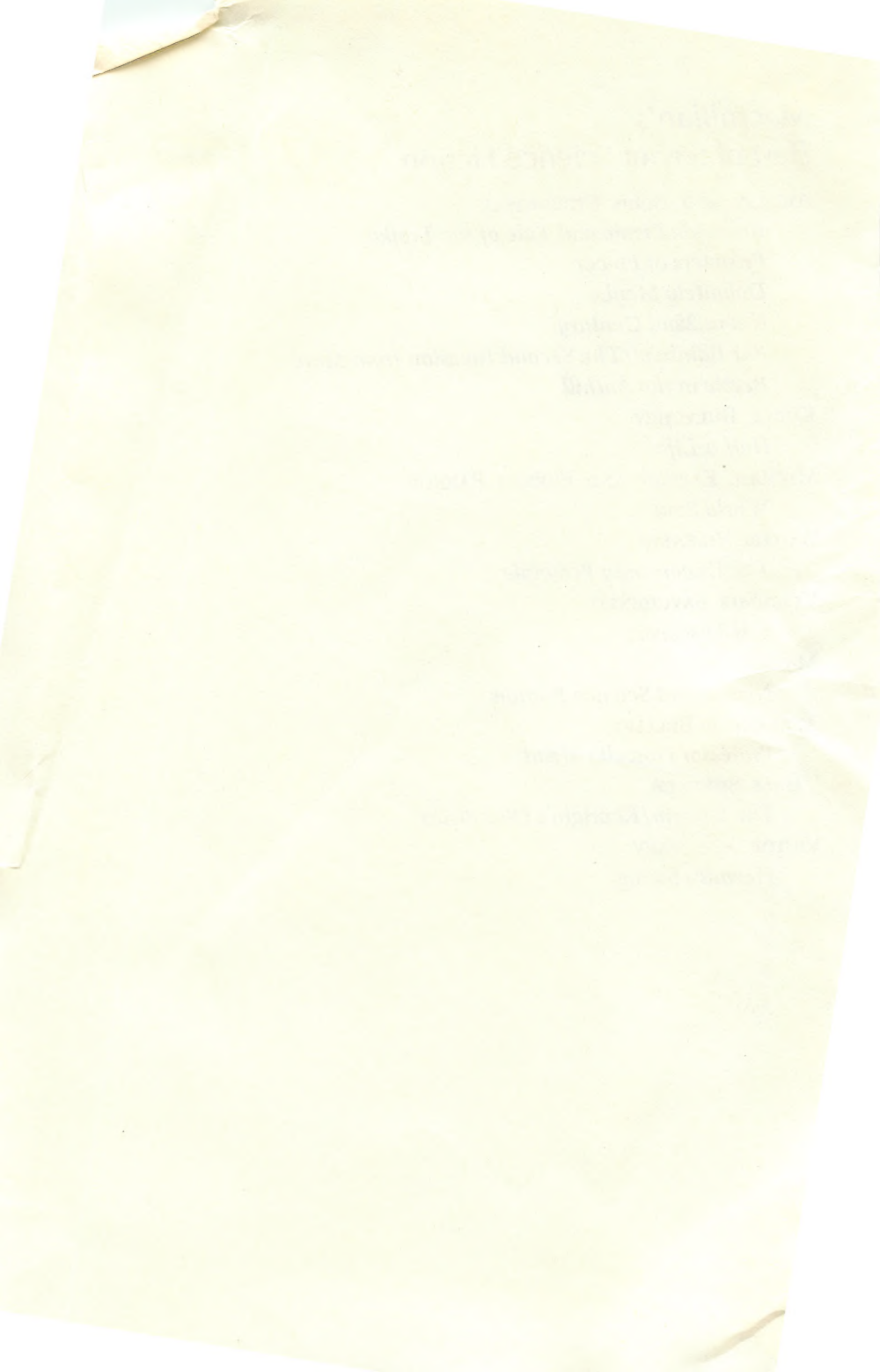
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VICTOR KOLUPAEV

Hermit's Swing



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Introduction

Fiction is two things: what is said, and how it's said.

Science fiction (this from Isaac Asimov) is three things: "What if —," "If only —," and "If this goes on —," often mixed in various proportions.

Victor Kolupaev's special gift lies in what is said about "What if —."

Science fiction is a hot tile in a greater mosaic called "fantasy." (The late Fletcher Pratt was once moved to remark, "*All* fiction is fantasy!")

Victor Kolupaev often, and sometimes startlingly, moves off the science fiction tile onto the overarching design, and there are stories here which will fill with anguish, if not fury, those hard-core, nuts-and-bolts science fiction addicts who insist that their chosen literature must follow the strict rules of chemistry and physics, and clear extrapolations thereof. For Kolupaev rejoices in the unexplained and the inexplicable and is quite happy injecting fantasy into his space opera. What prompts him to do this is, almost invariably, his great concern for that *inner* space in which dwells the humanity of human beings: love and yearning, the sweet burden of parenthood, self-sacrifice, courage, and loneliness.

What else, for example would prompt a science fiction writer even to entertain the notion that the crew of a spaceship, parsecs from Earth, would experience so poignant a longing for this "big blue marble" that the longing itself would instantaneously return them home?

What else would make a writer create a character who, in the most terrible instant of his life, creates for his three children a whole planet, complete with funny trees?

Along with his compassion, Victor Kolupaev has a funny bone, and like a surprisingly large percentage of his colleagues, the target of his ironies is the bumbling bureaucrat, the pompous administrator. What pleases us so very much about such satire, coming from Kolupaev or Lem or Savchenko, Kafka or Hinko Gottlieb, is not at all that bumbling and pomposity appear to be an Eastern and Central European characteristic, but the revelation that they are as universal to humanity as the color of blood. We witness these traits constantly in academia, in big business, in big publishing. A personal reminiscence: I was running a bulldozer on a very high-priority construction job, and one day, driving my machine through a company street, I saw a gang of some twenty hand-laborers filling a trench. I slewed the 'dozer around and made one pass from end to end of the trench, filling it completely, while the shovel brigade applauded enthusiastically. I was then blistered from head to toe by their foreman, who complained bitterly that he now had to transport the gang to another site and go through the trouble of telling them what to do there, when they could have stayed on this one for two more days. I tried to explain to him that it was not hubris which made me backfill his trench; I really felt that the project should be done, and every bit helped. He didn't see the point, and never will. You can imagine, then, my pleasure with Kolupaev's yarn herein about an engineer who finds he can meet a quota for electronic devices by using mental power, purely by concentrating on the blueprints until the devices appear, and that he can meet the quota in two-thirds of the estimated fulfillment time. All hell breaks loose, as you will see. (I wonder if anyone has thought of pomposity as a possible channel for planetary brotherhood and understanding . . .)

Then there's the wild story of the man who collects smiles. Here Kolupaev treads through fantasy to surrealism. For all its hilarity, one must be touched by the collector's archetype, the most beautiful smile of all, given him by a girl who died when she was twenty.

More than touching is the brief tale of *The Biggest House*, a kind of miniature *Aniara*, one that will be with you for long after

you have put the book down. And then there's the pretty girl who sells tomorrow's newspapers, and because of something she reads in one of them, makes a frightful choice.

The title story is a novelette, with plenty of fine extrapolative science fiction in it, as well as large portions of the author's humanism. Whether or not you can completely follow the complexities of his theory of time is moot. Maybe it doesn't matter. His strength is in what he says; how he says it may possibly obscure some of the fine points, but the race and flow of his narrative carry well, and the mystery and suspense are sustained, and the final revelation is satisfactory.

One must smile at a minor point. Twice in the story someone has to go and fix coffee and sandwiches. Who is told to go off and fix coffee and sandwiches? Elsa. Not Ezra, not Early, not Sven. Elsa.

In a future of parsecs and galaxies, ships hurtling faster than light, a science which can girdle a world with differential bands of time-rates, will it still be Elsa who has to go for coffee and sandwiches?

Theodore Sturgeon
San Diego 1980

